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9-20-2024

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Recommended Citation

Hyde, Rebecca C.; Albert, Amanda B.; Emery, Jamie L.; and Fancher, Sarah E., "Inclusive Interviewing: Leveraging the Virtual Format to Demonstrate Care for Future Colleagues" (2024). *University Libraries Publications*. 36.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/lib_papers/36

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Inclusive Interviewing: Leveraging the Virtual Format to Demonstrate Care for Future Colleagues

Rebecca C. Hyde, Amanda B. Albert, Jamie L. Emery, and Sarah E. Fancher

“...there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions...” (Machiavelli, 1532, Chapter VI)

Contemporary academic library recruitment practices are institution-centered, with persistent structural barriers that maintain a homogenous workplace and profession. These barriers disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), those with disabilities, the economically disadvantaged, and those less familiar with traditional academic hiring practices, including first-generation college students, early-career librarians, and individuals without previous experience working in higher education. While these issues are acknowledged in library literature, many academic libraries have been reluctant to actively change recruiting processes (Betz, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2019; Galvan, 2015; Lopez, 2022). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) suggest that one reason for this resistance, in respect to faculty hiring processes at predominantly white academic institutions, is that “change is difficult for many, especially when the change in question is to a system that serves and privileges us” (p. 576).

In this chapter, we explore positive, humane ways in which feminist principles of empathy and care can inform job interviews in academic libraries and shape the process into a more person-centered, or “whole person” ideal (Lopez, 2022). The whole person ideal authentically considers individuals’ experiences, preferences, and needs so that job opportunities

are truly equal for all. In encouraging candidates to bring their whole, authentic selves to the hiring process, academic libraries can preemptively guard against deauthentication often experienced by BIPOC library workers (Kendrick, 2018). It is possible to do this while still hiring for strategic priorities and expertise.

We assert that virtual interviewing can ameliorate exclusionary aspects of the hiring process and center people rather than organizations. Just as recruitment is the first step in a new colleague joining the library, the recruitment process itself can be the first incremental step in reforming an organization and changing its culture.

Our Proposal: Entirely Virtual Interviews

Traditionally aligned with local institutional practices, academic library job interviews prioritize physical co-location of the candidate and search committee. The process typically comprises two phases, beginning with an initial phone or virtual screening and proceeding to an on-campus interview. During the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, libraries made interviewing format adjustments as a matter of necessity in order to ensure the health and safety of candidates and employees. While the pandemic continues, global and U.S. public health officials declared the COVID-19 emergency over in May 2023 (Simmons-Duffin, 2023) and many believe that it is time (or past time) to return to pre-pandemic interview processes and expectations.

After this life-changing, mass-casualty, and mass-disabling event, we propose that academic libraries leverage changes library workers have already adapted to and move to an inclusive, all-virtual interview process. It is possible to conduct fully virtual interviews in a way that centers interviewees, while still collecting information needed to make sound hiring

decisions. Conducting not only first, but second-round interviews virtually may increase accessibility and equity, reduce spending, and add flexibility to the interview process.

Background

Ethics of Care

Ethics of care were conceptualized by second-wave feminist theorists Carol Gilligan (1982), Virginia Held (2006), Nel Noddings (1984), Joan Tronto (1993), and others. They imagine a model of moral reasoning based on care for others within the context of relationships, arguing that such a construct fits the moral lives of women. Even in a professional setting, the act of caring for and nurturing others is often thought of as reproductive (rather than productive) labor, and, as such, is undervalued in our society. Though there has been multidisciplinary debate about the theory, ethics of care have come to be recognized as a framework for the fiduciary duties that we owe to each other regardless of identity. Due to the primacy of relationships between and among library workers, ethics of care suggest that organizations have a duty and obligation to attempt to support the well-being of candidates as well as those already hired (Emery et al., 2023). In our experience, library workplace norms are dominated by capitalist patriarchal ideals that prioritize organizations over individuals. To embrace the needs of individuals, to care about them as whole people as a matter of policy, is to deliberately shift organizational culture. While an inclusive interview process is not a panacea for all ills of patriarchal capitalism, it is a concrete way to move an organization toward a new set of ideals. Consciously, consistently, and deliberately employing acts of care in constructing and executing the interview process also provides candidates a preview into the work culture of the organization and may help them to see themselves more easily in the prospective role.

Care for the Body

The recruitment and interviewing process is an inherently embodied practice, as search committees are actively recruiting a body, not just the intellectual capabilities of a person, to fill a role in the library. How a search committee demonstrates care for the body during the recruitment process can signal to the candidate how the library cares for the body and the *whole* person. Caring for the whole person - body, mind, and spirit - means creating a safe, authentic, and inclusive environment for the candidate, where they can experience their whole selves as belonging in the role. Academic libraries must determine how to recruit safely and responsibly, while considering the identities and needs of each candidate. Interviewers must avoid asking candidates about protected characteristics, such as family composition, disability status, or other health-related issues; therefore it is sensible to construct a recruiting process that is universally inclusive.

While library employees are sometimes asked or required to do things that could expose them to illness or injury, most full-time workers have access to protections and benefits such as workers' compensation, health insurance, and, in some cases, short-term disability. Job candidates have no such protections provided to them and may be precariously un- or underinsured. To expect candidates to undergo the same risks as employees is unreasonable. Outcomes for COVID-19 and other respiratory illnesses are worse for the un- and underinsured (Gaffney et al., 2022; Shadmi et al., 2020), the economically challenged (Smith et al., 2022), and for BIPOC (Grandy et al., 2022; Johnson-Agbakwu et al., 2022; Shadmi et al., 2020). Asking candidates to do things they may not be comfortable with is neither inclusive nor equitable. Part of our collective responsibility in the workplace is considering how predominantly white organizations reinforce white supremacy, racism, and ableism by rejecting COVID-19 mitigation

measures (Tran, 2022). By approaching the recruiting process with an ethic of care, academic libraries can create universal conditions of accessibility, safety, and vitality during the interview.

Social Performance and Normativity

Traditional interview structures assume candidates and committees are meeting in-person in a highly social environment. Candidates might be expected to have several question-and-answer sessions or give a job talk, eat a meal, or engage in another informal event, go on a walking tour of the library or campus, and so on. This traditional process is white, middle-class, able-bodied (Dadas, 2018), and arguably extroverted. These cultural defaults set candidates up to either perform or hide their authentic selves. Candidates with visible and invisible disabilities face additional hurdles during the traditional academic library interview process, particularly unstructured social elements such as meals, meet-and-greets, and tours (Anderson, 2021; Betz, 2022). Described as social performance by Arch and Gilman (2021), these parts of the interview (along with the marathon nature of multi-day in-person academic interviews) are physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting, and not indicative of potential job performance. Instead, they reward social skills, conformity (Anderson, 2021; Betz, 2022), and normativity, further contributing to the homogeneous nature of our field (Cole & Mross, 2022; Galvan, 2015). Instead of requiring candidates to disclose their disability or adjust to interview norms, we could move toward a more generous process (Anderson, 2021; Dadas, 2018). As Anderson reflects on the needs of neurodivergent librarian candidates, "...the burden should not be on autistic librarians to disclose their status. Instead, processes should be made more universally accessible so that their interview ... experiences are no different from that of a neurotypical peer" (2021, p. 57). The feminist approach moves away from merely affording accommodations when requested to a universally designed interview process.

Benefits of Virtual Interviews

Library literature increasingly reveals the benefits of virtual interviews. Michalak and Rysavy (2022) describe online interviewing as a way to make the process as “smooth and consistent” as possible (p. 101); Klare and Wright (2022) decided to only offer virtual interviews at their institution moving forward; and Cole and Mross (2022) suggest offering candidates a choice of modalities. However, despite many academic libraries using virtual interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, there has not been broad discussion or study on retaining this method. Contrastingly, discussion of this topic has exploded in the medical literature, where there has been a massive shift from in-person to virtual interviews for the roughly 45,000 new medical school graduates each year (Otugo et al., 2021). Benefits for candidates include a reduction in financial and time costs because they do not have to take multiple days off or spend money on travel; a reduction in anxiety by interviewing from a comfortable location; greater flexibility in scheduling; and the potential for breaking up the interview over multiple days (Bergelson et al., 2022; Kamboj et al., 2021; Suleman et al., 2022). Virtual interviews also benefit candidates from social and health perspectives, as they don’t have to ask for accommodations or provide private information.

Practical Applications

In this section, we recommend implementation of a virtual interview model that increases equity and centers individuals. Recognizing that our proposal to embrace and exclusively use virtual interviews could be viewed as controversial, we also suggest format-neutral changes that can make all interviews more person-centered.

Communication with Candidates

Search committees should always communicate with empathy and care for candidates as whole people. Communicating with empathy is not limited to *how* one shares information, but also *what* information is shared. Search committees should strive to provide candidates with complete information about the process, rather than assume applicants are knowledgeable about academic library hiring (Lopez, 2022).

One way to mitigate candidate anxiety is to provide an informational webinar about one's organization and hiring process (Frohna et al., 2021; Grandy et al., 2022; Tewell, 2022).

Webinars may be held live or recorded and posted on the library's website. A great way to promote one's institution and answer questions about specific positions, webinars can also be an avenue for search committee members to share what they're looking for in application materials and explain the recruitment process. These webinars can help expand the candidate pool and provide a service to those new to the academic hiring process.

The importance of communicating process-related information extends beyond the interview, as many early-career librarians are unaware of what they can negotiate for after they receive an offer, e.g., conference funds, new computer equipment, and time towards promotion or tenure. While search committee members are not usually involved in the negotiation process, they can ensure candidates know to ask for common things like moving expenses, so they don't feel taken advantage of once hired (as one author of this chapter experienced early in her career). Providing this information to all candidates before or during the interview can ensure their equal footing and leave even unsuccessful candidates feeling more prepared for future job negotiations and that their best interests were prioritized.

Identity

As institutions increasingly focus on recruiting different types of bodies, ensuring there is a diversity of representation of race, ethnicity, abilities or disabilities, gender identities, sexual orientation, and other intersecting identities is a vital cultural and institutional goal.

Organizations can let candidates, and employees, know they take this goal seriously by writing and sharing diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) statements that include the ways in which the library is accessible, as well as the demographic makeup of staff, and how DEIA is centered in library policies, procedures, and work culture. In addition to sharing such a statement, it is important to honor and respect each candidate's intersecting identities throughout the interview process. For example, search committees should offer candidates an opportunity to send pronouns, name pronunciation, and any other information about how they would like to be addressed in advance, and share similar information about search committee members and other interviewers. Otugo et al. (2021) recommend inviting candidates to submit an audio recording of their names, so that interviewers will be able to correctly pronounce them on the day of the interview. These small, but thoughtful, acts can create a more welcoming and inclusive atmosphere during the interview.

It is also important to give candidates an idea of how their intersecting identities will be at home in your library. Videos of not only physical spaces, but also current employees describing their work, what they like about the organization, and answering common candidate questions can be created. Search committees can set up informal virtual coffee breaks in lieu of in-person lunches or coffees so that candidates have the opportunity to interact with current employees. Bias can be reduced by using separate participant groups for social and evaluative parts of the interview and limiting feedback from social meetings (Arch & Gilman, 2021). Ideally, these sessions should be offered solely for the benefit of the candidate, to make them feel

welcome and provide a chance to ask questions without influencing the decision-making processes of the search committee, except in rare cases of grievous candidate misconduct.

Schedule

The physical act of recruitment means libraries need to ensure they are taking care of the body through ethical health and safety practices, including offering opportunities for refreshment, designing the schedule to make time for comfort or restroom breaks, and designating time for true respite during the interview. The candidate should be considered a partner in planning the interview schedule and consulted in the co-creation of the basic scheduling framework (Arch et al., 2021; Dadas, 2018). Soliciting information from candidates about whether there is a time of day before which it is difficult for them to start or after which it will be hard for them to continue, and whether they prefer frequent shorter breaks or fewer longer ones allows candidates more control over the schedule while maintaining their privacy. When these options are standardized and offered to all, there is no need for candidates to disclose protected information or request accommodations, which can introduce bias into the process. This practice also begins to change the power imbalance of the interview process, giving the candidate more agency (Dadas, 2018). It should be noted that candidate preferences may be expressed for many reasons. For example, one may have a medical condition that necessitates frequent breaks, and another may need longer breaks as a nursing parent who needs time to pump.

While the virtual interview gives candidates more physical flexibility and eliminates the stress of both travel and time away from work and home responsibilities, there is other stress and “Zoom fatigue” that can come with many virtual meetings in a row. The intense amount of close-up eye contact in virtual interviews may be more stressful than being across a table

(Bailenson, 2021). Interviewers should consider sitting back slightly from their camera so as not to take up the whole frame.

When creating interview schedules, search committees should be mindful of scheduling difficulty caused by differing time zones (Domingo et al., 2022). For very different time zones, the search committee can envisage creative scheduling possibilities, such as breaking the interview into shorter chunks over multiple days. When multiple candidates require different interview schedules, it is important to remember to strive for equity in the process, not equality.

Interview Questions

While not exclusive to the virtual interview format, interviews should be as structured as possible, with a list of specific questions asked of all candidates to ensure equity and inclusion. All planned interview questions should be provided to candidates at least a week in advance, offering the candidate a chance to prepare (Arch et al., 2021; Dadas, 2018; Lopez, 2022). This practice can not only lessen candidate anxiety, but also reduce the risk of introducing structural bias into the process, including the problematic propensity to hire for “fit” (Arch & Gilman, 2021), and provide a more equitable process for applicants with disabilities such as Autism Spectrum Disorder and Auditory Processing Disorder (Anderson, 2021; Dadas, 2018; Maras et al., 2021).

Most library positions do not routinely require instantaneous answers or fully-formed plans to be created in mere moments. When springing interview questions on candidates, search committees learn how they respond under pressure and their first impulse, but not necessarily what they would do after consideration and planning. When a candidate has questions in advance, the interview can be more conversational, and arguably, a better indicator of how a candidate will perform in the position.

Even when using prepared questions, search committee members should be trained to recognize unconscious bias in themselves (Cole & Mross, 2022) and coached to stay on topic during the interview to ensure that “all candidates are treated equally and that the interview process focuses on job-related skills, experience, and topics” (Arch & Gilman, 2021, p. 126). The committee should draft possible follow-up questions ahead of time to reduce potential bias or questions that stray too far into the personal (Arch & Gilman, 2021). These questions need not be identical for each candidate, but open-ended and flexible enough to ask given a candidate’s initial answer.

Burden of Cost

Without care, the virtual interview has the potential to shift the burden of cost onto the candidate and introduce extreme inequity. While most institutions pay for expensive flights, hotels, and meals, they may balk at spending money on equipment or space necessary for candidates to be successful during a virtual interview. This requires a change in thinking about what constitutes appropriate interview expenses.

Prior to a virtual interview, libraries should provide candidates with a list of technical requirements, including any hardware or software (Michalak & Rysavy, 2022), and offer to provide these items to candidates at no cost. Computer and computer accessory rentals are available in most locales, and less expensive items such as headphones can be purchased and delivered to the candidate for less than an organization would normally pay for incidentals during an in-person interview. Providing these items when needed is an easy way to demonstrate care and build goodwill, especially when a list of necessities is presented with the expectation that candidates simply mark off the ones they need.

Lack of an adequate internet connection and appropriate interview setting are both cited in the medical literature as top barriers to equity in virtual interviews (Domingo et al., 2022). When a candidate lacks a suitable internet connection or space in their home for an interview, a two-night reservation at a hotel local to the candidate and a high-speed internet upgrade can provide the space and technological access to comfortably focus on the interview. Some guides to virtual interviewing advise candidates to have a home environment free of distractions (Michalak & Rysavy, 2022; MLA Academic Program Services, 2020), but it is not reasonable to expect candidates to have such an environment. This expectation raises issues of equity and demonstrates a lack of compassion. While there is something to be said for embracing candidates as whole people in the messy glory of their intersecting identities, this can introduce bias.

During in-person interviews and related travel, institutions normally provide several meals for candidates. For virtual interviews, libraries should consider sending a food delivery gift card redeemable in the candidate's area, so that they can have meals delivered during the interview (Lee et al., 2022). All these provisions, equally offered and provided as needed, will help candidates focus and perform their best.

Technical Skills and Support

Leading up to a virtual interview, candidates should be given a guide to the appropriate software(s) and an opportunity to practice with a search committee member or technical support person to ensure a more equitable process and to alleviate candidate anxiety. Search committees should also provide a technical support person on the interview day to help support both the candidate and committee. This person need not attend the entire interview, but rather join at the beginning of each session to ensure closed captioning, screen sharing, and any other features are enabled, and be on-call if assistance is required. When things go wrong, it's important to practice

empathy for one's colleagues and the candidate. If the candidate visited campus, the onus to make technology work would be on the library. While libraries do not have the same level of control during a virtual interview, this responsibility should not entirely shift to the candidate. Libraries should ensure candidates have what they need and treat technical issues as inevitable.

Culture and Place

The most commonly reported disadvantages of virtual interviews are the inability to gain a good understanding of the physical workplace environment, the culture, and the city an institution is located in (Anteby et al., 2022; Domingo et al., 2022; Frohna et al., 2021; Grandy et al., 2022; Kamboj et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022). While there are ways to integrate some of this into the virtual interview, they are unlikely to provide the same depth and breadth of information as an in-person visit. For this reason, final candidates should be offered an optional, all-expenses-paid visit to campus. Such a trip has been suggested as a desirable follow-up to virtual interviews in the library and medical literature (Cole & Mross, 2022; Healy & Bedair, 2017). This trip allows the final candidate to gather information about the place and culture and make an ultimate decision regarding their interest in the position and organization. The trip can take place before or after a formal offer is made, but the candidate should know they will be offered the position. The candidate's continued interest may be confirmed, but the visit should not be conditional on acceptance of the offer.

An on-campus visit allows the candidate to see spaces in which they might work and live. This is especially useful in regards to the physical accessibility of both the library and campus. An in-person visit will also give the candidate a better idea of the demographic makeup of co-workers and other staff, students, and faculty (Betz, 2022) and the ways in which they live the

organization's stated values. This may impact the candidate's assessment of whether or not the institution is aligned with their personal values and goals.

One possible institutional concern is that a candidate may accept this trip offer with no intention of taking the position. Those with this concern should reflect on the patriarchal thinking that if the library spends money on a candidate, the library is owed something in return. Finding the right candidate (who is right for the institution and for whom the institution is right) is an investment of time and money that will pay off in the long run. Most candidates have no interest in wasting their time to travel to an institution they are not legitimately willing to work at. However, an in-person visit may reveal things about the institution or place that make them no longer interested. One way to ensure candidates are truly still interested in the position before coming to campus is to tell them in advance what the starting salary offer will be and how much room there is for negotiation. If an organization can't pay a candidate what they require, it is a waste of everyone's time to bring them for a visit.

Flexibility and Grace

It's important to remember, sometimes life gets in the way. Just as an in-person interview might need to be rescheduled due to illness or flight cancellations, extreme weather can cause power outages or internet connectivity issues impacting a virtual interview. It is important to extend virtual candidates the same flexibility and grace one would give to candidates dealing with flight delays. Search committee chairs or hiring managers are in a position to infuse a feminist ethic of care into the interview process and remind everyone involved to recognize and set aside biases and any capitalist expectations that the organization comes before the individual. They can frame and influence the ways in which colleagues receive news about rescheduling issues, technical difficulties, or candidate requests that differ from "standard" interview

processes. Advising everyone involved in the interview that they should not take any of these issues or requests into consideration when evaluating the candidate and emphasizing the need for understanding and flexibility can be impactful and even sow seeds of change in the organization.

Conclusion

Bound by the policies and restrictions of our institutions, it will take time and persistence to build empathy into academic library recruitment practices and make them more person-centered. One might not be able to implement every desired change; however, gradual progress in this direction must be prioritized and celebrated. This chapter only begins to reimagine ways in which the traditional academic library job interview can be re-oriented to person-centered processes. Taking *candidate* health and safety into account is new territory for institutions and an opportunity for libraries to walk our talk around DEIA. Prioritizing inclusive and accessible interviewing means rejecting capitalist notions of profit above all else and instead, creating an environment where people are valued over profit.

Ensnared in the culture of our profession and academia more broadly, it can be difficult for those in academic libraries to imagine alternatives to processes that seem to have served “us” and our organizations well in the past. However, these processes haven’t served everyone equally, and as Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) state, changing “status quo procedures is a critical entry point for challenging the reproduction of inequity” (p. 564). Some may argue that because they endured a grueling, in-person, multi-day interview process, those who succeed them should too. Our profession must reject this hazing mindset and provide future colleagues better experiences than our own, embedding the feminist principles of empathy and care into all practices.

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